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Comment:

U. S. Fumbling Hit in Viet Coup

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SAIGON, Sept. 16—Those dulcet words from Washington about powerful United States support for South Viet-Nam's Premier Nguyen Khanh's playing a key role in aborting the Sunday coup attempt may look good in the State Department's scrapbook.

But they don't square with events here.

The U. S. Embassy played a helpful role in squealing the coup. But it was not a decisive factor.

FUMBLING

Indeed, much of the time the Embassy was fumbling around in the dark.

Deputy U. S. Ambassador U. Alexis Johnson and his aides got into action Sunday evening after the coup leaders were confronted by an alliance of loyal young commanders in mid-afternoon.

Even then, the Embassy hedged its support in case the rebels still might win. When they finally supported the loyalist side, the United States did so via a broadcast from Washington that was heard here after the coup was crushed.

The Embassy believes Premier Khanh himself put down the coup and it still fails to understand the new power of "young Turk" generals who actually did the job while Premier Khanh, in Dalat, was out of touch.

Mr. Johnson thinks the high point of U. S. involvement was arranging a midnight meeting between Premier Khanh and Gen. Duong Van (Big) Minh whose solidarity supposedly broke the coup.

NO INFLUENCE

The fact is that Premier

Khanh played no part in his own salvation and Gen. Minh, despite his popularity and high-sounding title as chairman of the national steering committee, has no influence among the generals.

Where Mr. Johnson did act usefully was to discourage coup leader Brig. Gen. Lam Van Phat, in a 90-minute meeting, from the notion that the U. S. would support him.

But the meeting at the Embassy occurred after defeat was staring Gen. Phat in the face.

Here's the authoritative account:

The Embassy heard coup rumors Thursday and Friday, but instead of checking them out, disregarded them since rumors are so prevalent here.

By 8 a. m. Sunday, as advance rebel troops rolled into Saigon and disarmed police, the Embassy learned promptly, but was not alarmed.

At 8:45 a. m. Gen. William Westmoreland phoned Mr. Johnson to say it was a big rumble.

By 9:30 a. m. Mr. Johnson cabled the State Department it wasn't a coup, but a power play related to the scheduled return that morning of four Dalat generals.

AT DALAT

The Embassy then tried to phone Premier Khanh, but didn't know where he was—in a time of war and political crisis. They tried Cap St. Jacques, then finally caught him in Dalat, 150 miles north of here.

But Premier Khanh was making no move to return to Saigon to save his government. Instead, he requested the U. S. Embassy to send a representative to Dalat. An Embassy official flew there and at 10 a. m. telephoned Mr. Johnson on be-

half of Premier Khanh asking, "do you still support the Premier?"

Mr. Johnson in turn asked, "Does Khanh intend to take vigorous charge of affairs? If so, yes."

Still Premier Khanh remained at Dalat.

Meanwhile, CIA agents kept in touch with the rebel troop commander, Brig. Gen. Maj. Gen. Duong Van Duc, and a U. S. Air Force adviser stayed with the loyalist leader of the Vietnamese Air Force, Brig. Gen. Nguyen Cao Ky.

But Mr. Johnson's first contact with any of the principals of the drama came at 7:30 p. m. when he met with Gen. Phat. Politely but pointedly Mr. Johnson gave Gen. Phat the impression that the U. S. was not enthusiastic about the coup attempt, tho he refrained from actually opposing it.

MAIN CONCERN

With the mistaken notion it was to be the key to the crisis, Mr. Johnson's main concern now was to arrange a meeting of Premier Khanh and Gen. Minh. When Premier Khanh finally flew to Saigon late Sunday night Mr. Johnson hurried to the airport to urge him to call in Gen. Minh.

No sooner had Mr. Johnson left, than the meeting took place. But the young generals quickly sent Premier Khanh and Gen. Minh by plane to Cap St.

Jacques so there would be no confusion among the people as to who actually had put down the coup.

Mr. Johnson, returning to the Embassy, cabled Washington recommending a strong statement on the Voice of America

supporting Premier Khanh. The broadcast reportedly went on the air at 6 a. m. Monday.

It is doubtful whether the coupists listened. For the outcome of the coup attempt had been decisively settled by 2 a. m. anyway.

Gen. Duc agreed to a parley at 7:30 a. m. And soon rebel troops began an embarrassing return to their bases.